SELECTING A MEETING FORMAT

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The term "meeting format" refers to a number of meeting elements including meeting type, e.g., hearing or workshop, meeting size, meeting agenda, room arrangements, and leadership style. In this paper we will be discussing the major issues that should be considered in selecting a meeting format.

FORMAT FOLLOWS FUNCTION

The guiding principle of meeting design is that "format follows function," meaning that the design of the meeting should reflect the purpose of the meeting. The single most important thing to consider in designing a meeting is what you wish to accomplish by holding the meeting. There are five basic functions which meetings serve. These functions may be fulfilled each in a separate meeting or several functions may be fulfilled in a single meeting. The five basic functions are:

1. INFORMATION-GIVING:

In this function the agency is communicating information to the public. This information could include the nature of the study, the issues which have been identified by the agency, the available alternatives or the plan selected by the agency. The agency possesses the information and must communicate it in some manner to the public.

2. INFORMATION-RECEIVING:

In this case the public possesses the information, which could include public perceptions of needs, problems, values, impacts, or reactions to alternatives. This function stresses the need of the agency to acquire information held by the public.

3. INTERACTION:

While interaction clearly involves both information-giving and information-receiving, it also serves the additional purpose of allowing people to test their ideas on the agency or other publics and possibly come to modify their viewpoint as a result of the interaction. With this function it is not the initial information given or received which is critical as much as the process of testing, validating and changing one's ideas as a result of interaction with other people.

4.   <u>CONSENSUS-FORMING/NEGOTIATION</u>:

A step beyond interaction is to begin to move toward common agreements. Interaction alone may not assure any form of agreement, but in consensus-forming/negotiation the interaction is directed toward agreement on a single plan by all of the critical publics.

5.   <u>SUMMARIZING</u>:

This is the need at the end of a long process to publicly acknowledge the agreements that have been reached and reiterate the positions of the different groups toward these agreements. This function is required both to give visibility to the entire decision-making process which has taken place, and also to form a kind of closure now that the process is ending.

Each of these functions in turn establishes limitations on the kind of meeting format that is possible if the function is to be served. A few of these limitations and implications are shown below.

<u>Information-giving</u>: Since the information-giving function means that information must flow from the agency to all the various publics, then it is appropriate to have a meeting format which primarily allows for presentations from the agency with questions or responses related to clarifications of that information or requests for additional information. This means that the classic meeting with one person at the front of the room making a presentation to an audience in rows--which is a suitable and efficient method for communicating information-- may be a suitable format for this function.

<u>Information-receiving</u>: When the function is reversed and the need is to obtain information from the public, then having one person stand up at the front of the room addressing an entire audience is an extremely inefficient and uneconomical means of obtaining information. In this case the function would require that opportunities be provided for the maximum number of people to provide information to the agency. This criteria is not met when only one person can speak at a time addressing the entire audience. As a result there may be a need to consider breaking the audience into smaller groups so that comments may be collected on flip charts, or utilize techniques in which each participant can provide information on 3 X 5 cards (such as the Nominal Group Process Technique), or any other method that allows for the maximum number of people to be providing information at the same time. To serve this function it is not absolutely necessary that opportunities be provided for discussion or interaction unless that discussion and interaction is necessary to generate new information.

<u>Interaction</u>: Interaction by its very nature requires that an audience be broken down into groups small enough so that there is time and opportunity for individuals to exchange information and ideas and discuss them all thoroughly. This usually means either that meetings are limited in size such as a coffee klatch or advisory committee meeting, or that any larger meeting is broken down into a small group during the period in which this

function is being met. There is no way that a large public meeting will provide anything more than minimal opportunities for interaction.

Consensus-forming/negotiation: Like interaction, consensus-forming/negotiation also requires intense interaction and therefore must be accomplished in some form of small group. In addition, the requirement for consensus formation usually means that some procedure is utilized which assists the group in working toward a single agreed-upon plan rather than allowing for simply an open discussion with no specific product.

Summarizing: Since the function of summarizing is to provide visibility to the entire process which has taken place, it may again be suitable to use large public meetings as a means to serve the summarizing function. In this way individuals and groups can be seen taking positions and describing their involvement in the planning process which has preceded this meeting. This does not, however, automatically mean that a public hearing is the appropriate form of meeting to serve this function as there are many creative and less formal means by which a visible summary may occur without the legalistic procedures of a formal hearing.

PUBLICS TARGET/ANTICIPATED AUDIENCE

Once the function of the meeting has been determined, it is also necessary to take into consideration the particular audience that you are attempting to reach in the meeting. If, for example, you are seeking the active participation of a small group of individuals representing the range of public interests, then you will undoubtedly want a highly interactive meeting format. If, on the other hand, you are expecting a very large audience but many of the participants will not be highly sophisticated as far as technical background, then you may want a meeting function which allows an information-giving function as well.

Clearly audience size is also a major issue in meeting design. A workshop format, for example, is limited to approximately 20 persons; although many of the advantages of a workshop can be obtained if a larger audience is broken down into smaller work groups for a specific assignment. The large group/small group format, though, is limited by the facilities which you have available. If, as occurs in some communities, the only available meeting facility is an auditorium with seats fastened to the floor in mixed rows, then your meeting format becomes more limited unless you are able to break the audience into small classrooms or other rooms near the main auditorium.

POLITICAL CLIMATE

Another major consideration in meeting design is the politic al climate in which the meeting will be held. An analysis of the political climate should include such issues as the attitude of the public toward the agency, the attitude of the public toward the information that will be reviewed in the meeting, as well as the attitude of either cooperation or competitiveness between the various publics. The political climate may have a strong impact on format selection. For example, while the large group/small group format is usually a highly effective meeting format, there have been instances in communities in which there was considerable

antagonism toward either the agency or the project where the public resisted being broken down into small groups, feeling that it was an attempt on the part of the agency to manipulate by "dividing and conquering." In these cases the public may insist that all spokesmen have an opportunity to be heard by all people in attendance at the meeting. This situation is, however, the exception and there has been little resistance and much support for the large group/small group format in those situations where substantial antagonism did not already exist prior to the meeting. If there are strong factions or strongly opposing interests within the community then the meeting format should do nothing to enhance or reinforce these groups in their opposition to each other. For example, meetings should not be designed in which "all environmentalists" or "all people interested in development" are broken into small groups for further discussion. This has a tendency to reinforce the antagonism between the groups and further polarize positions leaving the agency in the untenable position of attempting to negotiate between antagonistic and hostile groups.

A final factor to be considered in the political climate is the intensity of interest. One very obvious impact that very high community interest will have on a program is an increase in attendance at any meetings. There are several current public participation programs nationwide at this time which average 500 to 2,000 participants per meeting. Clearly such an audience has a substantial impact on the formats that are available to the meeting designer. Another impact that high interest in the study will have is a willingness of participants to come into relatively long and intense public participation activities, such as an 8-hour workshop, a charrette, or a periodic meeting of a task force or advisory committee. Without this intense interest these activities which require a greater sacrifice of time and emotional energy are less likely to have enthusiastic participation. Finally, when there is extremely high intensity of interest and a potential for large audiences it may be desirable to consider the possibility of multiple meetings so that the audience is broken down into more manageable size. The greater the interest the more likely it is that those who attend the meeting wish to participate, and as a result, it is necessary that the meetings covering issues with intense interest provide increased opportunities for participation. The energy and enthusiasm which comes from intense interest can be turned into intense opposition and frustration if full opportunities are not allowed for that interest to be expressed.

ROOM ARRANGEMENTS

After determination of the meeting type, based on the issues addressed above, the second most important issue which faces a meeting designer is the room arrangement, including the arrangement of tables, chairs, flip charts, etc. In the same way that the type of meeting selected reflects the function of the meeting, the room arrangements also reflect the relationships between the participants. For example, Figure A shows the most typical meeting format.
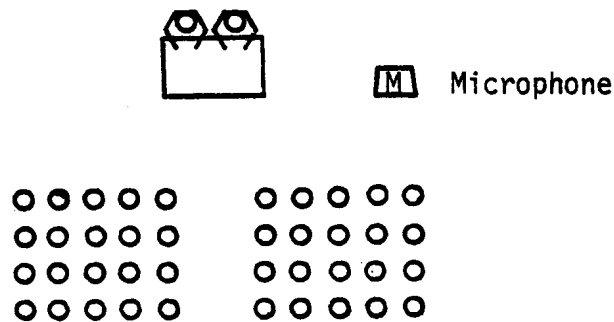
[M] Microphone

Figure A

As one can quickly see by glancing at the drawing, the source of all information and wisdom clearly proceeds from the front of the room. In addition, this seating arrangement establishes a relationship in which all participants talk to the agency representative at the front of the room rather than to each other. As a result, this seating arrangement may be useful and appropriate in a situation where the major function of the meeting is information-giving--when it is appropriate that the seats reflect that the source of information is the front of the room where the agency representatives are seated. If, however, you would like to encourage at least some minimal interaction between participants in the audience and also break up the we/they separation implicit in the seating arrangement in Figure A, then you might want to consider placing the chairs in a semicircle so that at least portions of the audience can see the faces of other participants and talk to each other as well as the agency representative, as shown in Figure B.
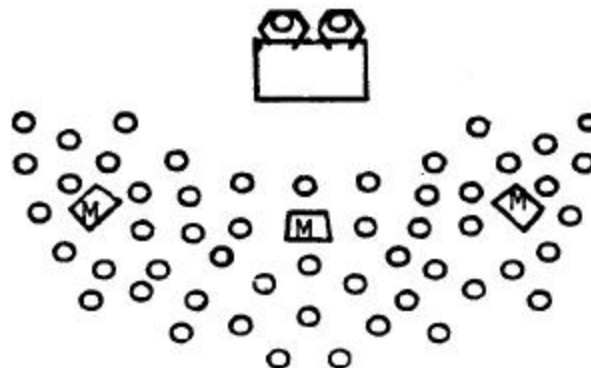
Figure B

In this arrangement the microphones are also placed so that the participants do not have to come to the front of the room in order to participate and so may participate in a manner which is more comfortable to them rather than participate on "the agency's terms." The seating arrangements shown in Figures A and B are both suitable arrangements for large audiences and are particularly suited for information-giving. They may also be suitable for information-receiving or the summarizing functions, although there are alternative formats for those two functions which may even be more useful.

The optimal seating arrangement for interaction and for consensus-forming negotiation is the circular arrangement shown in Figure C. Since it is usually difficult to obtain individualized tables and desks, the next most frequent seating arrangement that is still appropriate for interaction and consensus formation, is the seating arrangement shown in Figure D. The critical feature of these two seating arrangements is that eye contact can be established and maintained by all participants with each other, and the physical distance between the participants is not too great. Since it is also not always possible to get the trapezoid tables shown in Figure D, an alternative seating arrangement which accomplishes the same purpose although leaving some gaps between participants is the configure shown in Figure E using rectangular tables.

Figure C

Figure D

Figure E
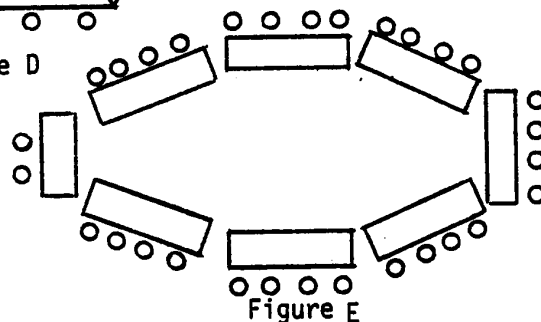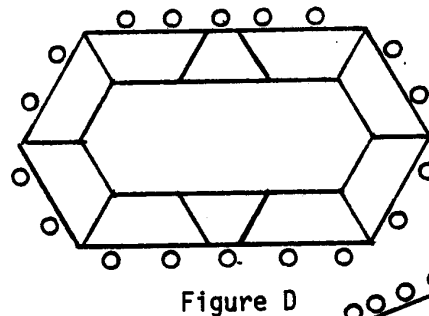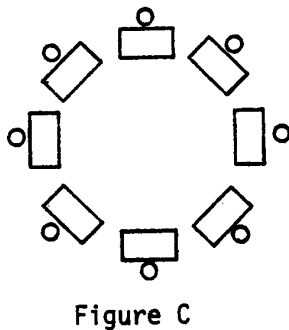
Any of these configurations (which are essentially variations on a circle) have an upper limit of approximately 25 to 30 partic ipants before the physical distance from one end of the circle to the other is so great that communication becomes constrained and unnatural. There are, however, seating arrangements which will allow for up to 100 participants in a seating configuration that still clearly communicates that the purpose of the meeting is for interaction between the participants. In Figure F is shown a seating arrangement used by the Committee for Economic Development.
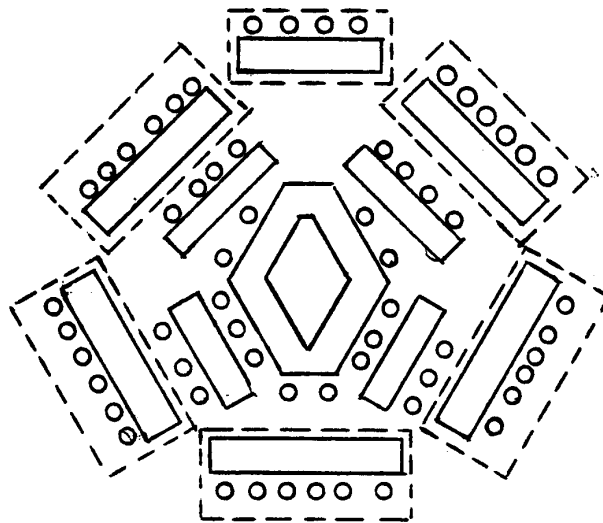

Figure F

This arrangement permits 100 or more persons to work on important worldwide economic issues. While the number of participants is greatly increased by this room arrangement it remains clear that the purpose of the arrangement is to encourage communication between the participants rather than simply between the participants and the agency leaders.

When an agency wishes to combine both an information-giving function and an interaction function, then the room arrangement shown in Figure G may be suitable.

In this arrangement the information giving will be accomplished in the semicircle tables in the remainder of the room. If the facility in which you are meeting does not permit for both functions in the same room, then it might be worthwhile to consider holding meetings in schools where it is possible to hold the main session in the auditorium and break the participants into small discussion groups to be held in individual classrooms.
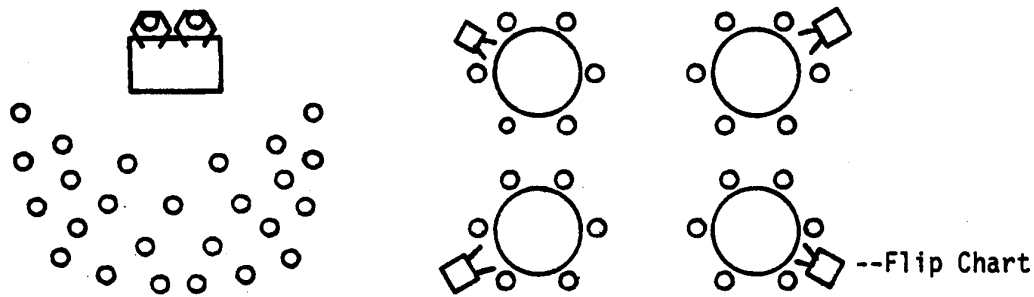
Figure G

An alternative format, which can be used when participants will be working in small discussion groups but there is still some need for the agency to supply information to all the participants, is to use the banquet format used in Figure H.
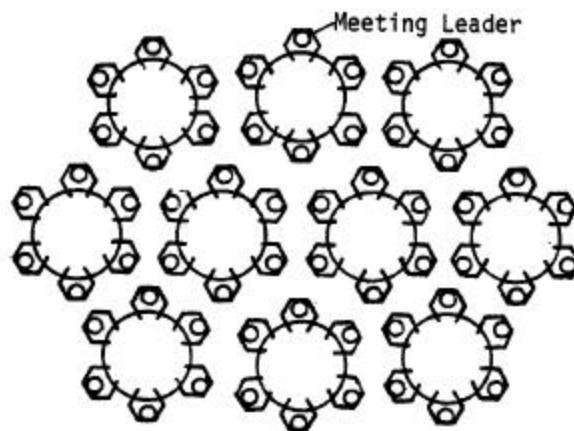

Figure H

In this configuration the meeting leader may make a short presentation while standing at one of the tables, but the major focus of the meeting is clearly the small group interaction. This format might be particularly suitable for a relatively large workshop in which the initial presentation is limited primarily to instructions, and the bulk of the meeting will be spent in the small discussion groups.

Naturally there are numerous variations on all the configurations shown above. These examples should serve to illustrate that seating arrangements are a significant part of the maxim "format follows function," and

hopefully will encourage meeting designers to consider the most appropriate seating arrangements for the type of meeting they wish to hold rather than adopting the traditional meeting format only because it is habitual.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

The leadership style the agency representatives use to conduct meetings is also a major component in the overall effectiveness of the meeting. Even if great care has been made to design the meeting format most appropriate for the interaction, with a seating arrangement that tends to encourage interaction; if the meeting itself is led in a rigid, authoritarian manner the public reaction to the agency may still be negative. Typically, people leading meetings in an authoritarian manner do so because they have never seen good models or more informal and consultative styles, or they believe they must act in an authoritarian manner in order to exercise adequate control. Yet, historically it has been precisely those meetings which have been run in an arbitrary and authoritarian manner which have been most likely to get out of control or become disorderly. If the style of meeting leadership is such that participants feel consulted and believe the meeting is being run on behalf of everybody, then the participants have a substantial stake in maintaining order and supporting any procedural suggestions of the leader. If the meeting is run in a highly authoritarian manner, then the public has little stake in maintaining order--their needs may be best met by disorder--so that the heavy-handed approach in fact runs closer to losing control of the meeting than the more consultative informal style. The critical element in effective meeting leadership appears to be that the audience feel that the meeting is "theirs" rather than just the agency's. When participants believe that the meeting is everybody's meeting they are likely to observe ground rules and even assist the meeting leader in maintaining order.